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Characteristics of State Law Enforcement Liaison Programs: Case Studies

As supported by the Governors Highway Safety Administration (GHSA) and State Highway Safety Offices (SHSOs), the law enforcement liaison (LEL) program hires LELs to interact with and recruit law enforcement agencies (LEAs) to help carry out traffic safety programs and initiatives. State LEL programs vary to allow States to determine their individual needs and to tailor their approaches to best fit their LEAs and enforcement contexts.

A previous phase of this project, *Characteristics of State Law Enforcement Liaison Programs: Survey Results* (Decina & Lococo, 2022), surveyed individual LELs and sponsoring organizations to attain a comprehensive understanding of LEL backgrounds, responsibilities, activities, and the organizational structures that contextualize their work. The study found an array of characteristics that LELs identified as important for meeting their job responsibilities, such as a law enforcement education and experience, strong interpersonal and oral communication skills, connections with LEAs in their jurisdictions, and demonstrated understanding of State traffic safety laws. The study also found large variation in the percentages of LEAs participating in traffic safety programs reported by LELs. While the analyses of the variation using rates of LEA participation and several LEL program characteristics did not uncover any patterns, it suggested opportunities for additional gains (see NHTSA, 2022).

The present study follows up on these findings by conducting in-depth interviews of LELs to specifically identify the most important attributes that aid them in reaching their traffic safety and SHSO grant program goals. To do this, the project team developed an interview guide, selected sites, recruited LELs, and collected and analyzed data from nine interviews covering seven separate topic areas.

Method

The project team developed an interview guide consisting of seven topics and questions within each topic focusing on attributes that would facilitate LELs in meeting their work goals: (1) Sponsoring Organization Involvement, (2) Staff and Resource Allocation, (3) Roles and Responsibilities, (4) Performance Measures, (5) Outreach, (6) Communication, and (7) COVID-19 Pandemic Effects. The team selected candidate sites based on characteristics that varied in the previous survey.

Nine LELs—each from a different NHTSA Region (out of 10 regions overall)—were contacted and agreed to participate in the study. The principal investigator and interview moderator reviewed the interview transcripts using manual content analysis, with data sorted and summarized into response categories.

Results

Topic 1: Sponsoring Organizational Involvement

More than half (56%) the LELs appreciated help and guidance from their sponsoring organizations, especially administrative and information technology support, and all but 1 LEL (89%) reported communicating with their sponsoring organization daily or almost daily. A similar number of LELs also asserted that their control of the processes of LEA outreach (56%) and performance evaluation (44%) were essential in the success of grantees obtaining and maintaining traffic safety programs.

Topic 2: Staff and Resource Allocation

SHSOs determined the number of LELs in each State. While less than half (44%) of LELs believed there were an adequate number of them in their States, a third (33%) expressed a desire to increase their number. LELs reported primarily focusing on LEA outreach (56%), followed by technical assistance and professional training to LEAs (33%), grant activities (33%), and equipment management (33%). LELs also used crash data to allocate time and resources for programs areas (89%), and to determine LEA site recruitment (78%), program direction (67%), type of enforcement (67%), enforcement locations (56%), and time and resources dedicated to grantees (44%).

Topic 3: Roles & Responsibilities

The most important responsibility LELs identified for themselves was maintaining open communication with LEAs to promote professionalism and trust (67%). LELs also reported assisting SHSOs in selecting grantees (78%), providing technical assistance in grant applications to prospective and current grantees (78%), supporting grantees throughout the grant period (67%), financially auditing grantees (56%), and evaluating grantee performance (100%). These responsibilities are related to the seven characteristics identified by LELs as important for meeting their responsibilities in the survey.

Most LELs also described the utility of presenting crash data to persuade “hard-to-reach” LEAs of the need for traffic enforcement (67%). All LELs were involved in standardized field sobriety testing used in impaired-driving stops, and most were involved with law enforcement officers trained as drug recognition experts (78%), checkpoint training (67%), and the “Below 100” program (56%). This finding was consistent with the identification of providing professional training to LEAs as a common State LEL responsibility in the survey.

Topic 4: Performance Measures

Almost all LELs reported traffic safety metrics were important for performance (89%) and that SHSOs determined the metrics (e.g., contacts, officer hours, citations) (89%). LELs used these performance measures to improve enforcement strategies (e.g., change of locations, checkpoints instead of saturation patrols) (56%), better evaluate enforcement details (e.g., need for more spotters) (44%), adjust or defund budgets (33%), and provide additional training (22%). About half of LELs reported some responsibility in helping LEAs meet their performance goals (55%), and a third reported no responsibility (33%). If LEAs did not reach performance goals, almost all LELs followed-up with informal emails or telephone calls (89%) and many with personal meetings (67%).

Topic 5: Outreach

The LEL’s prime contacts with prospective grantees were with chiefs, sheriffs, and project coordinators (67%). A few LELs met with LEAs more than 5 times per year (22%), a third three to five times per year (33%), and the last third only one to two times per year (33%). All LELs discussed the importance of tact and diplomacy in interacting with LEAs, and many also mentioned the importance of identifying the correct LEA point of contact, not conducting surprise visits, and not circumventing the chain of command. Several LELs also mentioned they experienced challenges in recruiting LEAs because of a lack of funding or equipment provided to them by their programs, which was also mentioned in the survey results. Last, most LEAs reported coordinating with other highway safety and related traffic safety partners (e.g., schools, community coalitions, Mothers Against Drunk Driving) to promote community support to the grantees’ programs and provide them with additional highway safety message outreach (67%).

Topic 6: Communication

In contrast to traffic safety-related groups, about half of LELs reported not interacting—or doing so very little—with community safety groups (56%). Almost all LELs (89%) reported not interacting with media and leaving media outreach to the SHSO or the State’s media specialists, although many did

report attending events such as interviews or press releases. More than half of LELs do not post messages online or use any form of social media (56%). Of the LELs that do, most report sharing messages concerning enforcement campaigns, crash stats, and campaign materials, principally targeting the public but sometimes also targeting LEAs and grantees.

Topic 7: COVID-19 Pandemic Effects

All LELs recorded decreases in enforcement contacts, citations, and arrests and reductions in traffic unit enforcement hours due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most LELs (78%) noted decreases in LEA participation in the first 6 months of the pandemic (spring and summer 2020) that nearly recovered to pre-pandemic levels by early 2021. To ameliorate these pandemic-related changes in traffic enforcement activities, most LELs reported using strategies like increasing LEA contacts, allowing carryover of funding, and sending out crash data from their jurisdictions.

Conclusions

The present project conducted interviews to identify the most important attributes of LELs and the characteristics of their programs that aid them in reaching their work goals. LELs identified many attributes as important, and particularly emphasized (1) effective coordination with their SHSOs, (2) autonomy in determining and planning strategic enforcement activities, (3) frequent and open communication with LEAs, (4) providing outreach and technical assistance for LEAs, and (5) keeping LEAs focused on traffic safety and meeting the performance goals of the grant. LELs may also benefit by taking more advantage of social media. By engaging in these activities comprehensively, LELs may find greater success in recruiting and distributing grants to LEAs seeking to enhance traffic safety in their communities.

Reference

Decina, L. E., Alonge, M., and Quiñones, T. (2023, January). *Characteristics of state law enforcement liaison programs: case studies* (Report No. DOT HS 813 392). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

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